

# SOCIALISM & THE HOUSING MOVEMENT: LESSONS FROM BOSTON

OLD A7C  
Winter 1984

by Kathy McAfee\*



**D**uring the past decade the failure of capitalism in the U.S. to provide adequate housing for its own *working class* population has become increasingly obvious. One result has been a rising level of tenant and community activism. But many housing organizers, including socialists, have not understood the root causes of the housing crisis or have chosen, for ideological or tactical reasons, not to act on the basis of that understanding. We have approached the housing crisis as if it were a series of vaguely connected "housing issues," rather than as a fundamental aspect of the system's failure.

Meanwhile the crisis is deepening. Low-income people in the cities are forced to double-up or move away as a result of rent increases, abandonment, or arson. And not only low-income people are affected; in cities and

suburbs alike, the price of keeping a roof over one's head for many includes burdensome rent or mortgage payments, insecurity, neighborhood instability, and lowered expectations.

City officials point to showcase "revitalized" neighborhoods in an effort to distract attention from the spreading acres of weed-filled lots and boarded-up buildings. Closer inspection reveals that these pockets of prosperity have been carved out at the expense of the former residents and through the input of amounts of money and labor far beyond the means of the majority of city-dwellers.

These things are not temporary distortions, but are the inevitable outcome of capitalist logic applied to the housing market within the context of the broader crisis of capitalism. Because working people and unemployed have suffered declining real incomes—and thus decreased ability to pay for housing, housing investors find that it does not pay to build housing for them or

\*Kathy McAfee is an activist in the housing movement in Boston, and the City Life Collective.

rent housing to them. Especially when the profits to be made from speculation, condominium conversion, arson for profit are so much more attractive.

Thus the roots of the housing crisis go deeper than Reaganism or recession. It will not disappear as a result of a change in the federal administration or an "upturn" in the economy. That is why we in City Life, a socialist organization with 10 years of experience in housing organizing in Boston, are convinced that we have to help point the way toward an alternative to the outmoded and destructive system of housing for profit: a socialist solution to the crisis that is concrete, credible, and worth fighting for.

## The Housing Movement Today

Most housing activists in Boston and other cities have not begun to think in these terms (see below). They have been defensive in their tactics and self-conception. The demands and programs that have been put forward by housing organizers have usually been limited to measures to tax or restrict private investment in housing and commercial development rather than to replace it.

The kinds of solutions most commonly proposed fall into two main categories. Tenants are urged to lobby and vote for rent and eviction controls, regulation of condominium conversions, and other "renters' rights" measures. The versions of rent and condo controls usually called for would regulate the housing market to some extent. But at the same time, they are designed to protect the profitability of rental housing and avoid provoking disinvestment. Consequently, they are so moderate and limited in scope that they would benefit only a minority of tenants, mainly those with middle and high incomes. This kind of rent control, if it could be won in cities like Boston, would leave most working class tenants—the great majority of renters—still paying far more than they can afford for housing, and in the context of continuing disinvestment and abandonment.

The other kind of housing reform most often proposed involves various kinds of government subsidies, including expansion of Section 8-type rent subsidy programs and mortgage subsidies to promote home and condo ownership by low and moderate-income people. What programs of this nature boil down to is a form of welfare for landlords, developers, and bankers. They shore up the real estate industry and exacerbate inflation in the housing market. While the occupants of subsidized units may benefit, those benefits are paid for mainly by working class taxpayers, and the net effect is the redistribution of income upwards.

In short, while many people propose tinkering with the capitalist housing system, almost nobody has proposed a realistic way to begin to replace it. The slogan, "Housing for People, Not for Profit," seen on signs and banners at so many tenant rallies, remains undefined or even contradicted by the specific proposals supported by folks waving the banners.

## Liberal Dilemmas

There are several reasons for this. First, many housing activists are not aware, or do not agree, that the commodity nature of housing is at the root of the current crisis. Imbued with capitalist assumptions and values, they cannot or do not want to imagine a real alternative. Others, including many socialists, are

committed to the goal of building a broad alliance of tenants of all classes, and believe it would be a strategic error to try to build mass support for an explicitly anti-capitalist program.

There are also many activists who remain within capitalist boundaries in their analysis and program simply because they feel it is unrealistic to try to push beyond these limits in the present political climate. If we cannot even win rent control, they reason, how can we win anti-capitalist housing reforms? They see the weakness of the tenants movements, the fading of liberalism, and the assertiveness of the ideological right, and conclude that only very mild reforms, directed at the worst "abuses" of the system but not challenging it, have a chance of being won.

In our view, this line of reasoning is self-defeating because it limits its sights to programmatic proposals so obviously inadequate that they scarcely seem worth fighting for. This approach is also short-sighted in that it fails to recognize the rate at which the current system is deteriorating, the growing sense of desperation among working class city residents, and their increasing openness to more radical alternatives, including socialist ones.

## An Alternative

What we need to include in our program is the notion of "socialization of housing." Socialization can take more than one form, as will be shown below. The essential thing is that socialized housing cannot be bought and sold as a commodity on the private market. Its use-value as shelter, and not criteria of profitability, should determine how housing is built, maintained and distributed. This kind of program could provide the inspiration and sense of direction that most of the movements around housing currently lack. As conditions worsen, it will sound increasingly like plain common sense.

Of course, calling for socialized housing and achieving it are two very different things. The formulation of a strong socialist program will not eliminate the need to organize and fight our battles one by one. We will still need to win limited reforms at first, and in the process, build the working class organization, consciousness, and power that will be necessary to achieve more fundamental change.

But there is a crucial difference between organizing for reforms—such as rent subsidies—that reinforce the profit system, and those which are steps in the direction of getting profit out of housing: for example, public takeover and rehabilitation of tax-delinquent or substandard apartment buildings. Equally crucial is the difference between fighting for step-by-step victories as if these were ends in themselves, and fighting for the same reforms as part of a broader socialist program. For instance, if rent control were presented as *part* of an over-all plan to eliminate housing speculation and reverse the trend toward the destruction of urban neighborhoods, we could be much more effective in mobilizing support for rent control.

## Lessons from Experience

City Life's position has evolved gradually as we have tried to analyze the successes and failures of 10 years of hard-fought battles over rent control, arson, and dis-

placement in Boston and the neighboring cities of Cambridge and Somerville.

But before summing up the successes and failures of the movements here, we need to understand the context in which these struggles have unfolded: the physical and economic transformation of Boston, in the planning stages since the post-WWII years, and begun in earnest in the mid-60s.

### The Context

Over the past 15 years, Boston's housing market has been transformed in the wake of major public and private investment in so-called "revitalization": urban renewal, downtown redevelopment, and planned displacement and gentrification. The late 1960s saw the destruction of older factory and warehouse areas near the central city, and the demolition of entire working class neighborhoods to make way for luxury high-rise housing, government and commercial office towers, the expansion of elite medical and educational institutions, and the development of fancy shopping and entertainment districts. This redevelopment was seen by the ruling class of the city as central to the economic modernization of the region, including the replacement of many of the manufacturing industries with high-technology research and development, service industries (medicine, education, finance, insurance, real estate, and tourism), and the government infrastructure to support all of the above.

This transformation was accompanied by a restructuring of the labor market. Blue collar jobs at the middle and upper end of the working class pay scale were lost. These were replaced by a nearly equivalent number of mostly poorly-paid, non-unionized jobs in the service sector, plus a significant number of technical, professional, and managerial positions.

This change in the composition of the employed work force had an impact on the housing market: there were a lot more households in the city whose incomes were fixed or falling and who could not afford to pay increased housing costs. At the same time, there was a growing sector who could afford to pay more. The location of their jobs in the "new" downtown gave them added incentive to move to or remain living in the central city. It was this widening gap between these two sectors of the population—not some sudden change in the psyches of suburbanites—that was the basis of the "back to the city" movement and the displacement of the urban poor in downtown neighborhoods by the "gentry."

Of course, this gentrification was not the result of market forces alone. The trend was actively promoted by city government policies: the channeling of federal grants and subsidies into "upscale" areas, tax breaks and giveaways of public land and buildings to commercial and condominium developers, blockage by the city of low and moderate-income housing development by community-based groups, and the undermining of rent control.

In line with these priorities, City Hall has services to low income and especially minority neighborhoods. Schools have been closed and bus routes, health centers and other services withdrawn from communities where housing has deteriorated as a result of lower resident incomes, disinvestment by landlords, and redlining by mortgage lenders. Sufficient funds do not ex-

ist, the city claims, to keep street lights and traffic signals working or to board up vacant buildings in these neighborhoods. Meanwhile, over in gentryville, public funds are poured into plush amenities like gas lights and brick sidewalks.

For years, arson for profit has been tolerated by city officials and has taken place on a frightening scale in both kinds of neighborhoods. In disinvested areas, arson enables property owners to bail out by "selling to the insurance company." It also reduces the numbers of residents from population groups considered political and financial liabilities by the city government, and it clears land for future, profitable redevelopment. In areas that are undergoing gentrification, arson enables property owners to clear their buildings of tenants, especially those still covered by rent control, whose very presence reduces the market value of their buildings. (Small fires are a quicker and more reliable method of eviction than court procedures.)

As a result of all this, the "New Boston," with its gleaming skyscrapers, brownstone condos, and food boutiques, has its dark counterpart in the new "urban prairies": extensive burned-out blocks dotted by a few rotting buildings. Between these two extremes are the ailing but still alive residential neighborhoods, mostly on the outer edges of the city, where working class tenants and homeowners struggle to heat and maintain their houses while footing much of the bill for the city budget through their property taxes.

### The Resistance

Boston residents have not accepted all this passively; they have fought back and resisted displacement, deterioration, and rising housing costs in many ways. Probably the most important, and certainly the most publicized aspect of this resistance has been the long battle in which rent control was won and then lost again.

During the period of 1970 to 1972, a coalition of Eastern Massachusetts tenants groups won passage of statewide rent control enabling legislation and the adoption of rent control in Brookline, Cambridge, Lynn, Boston, and Somerville. In Boston, the program covered all existing apartments except those in owner-occupied buildings with three units or less. It allowed landlords a "fair" profit based on the net income generated by the building in a standard base year prior to rent control, and established a limited number of "just causes" for which tenants could be legally evicted.

This version of rent control was in effect through 1975. The extent to which it kept rents down in Boston is debatable. Many landlords never registered their property with the Rent Control Board, and many gave rent increases without going through the required hearing process. Landlords able to hire lawyers and accountants usually had little difficulty getting the Rent Board to approve increases that brought their rents up to the level that the market at the time would bear. A gaping loophole in the regulations permitting de-control of "rehabilitated" apartments allowed enterprising landlords to de-control and empty entire buildings and even entire blocks.

There is little disagreement, however, that even this weak form of rent control was a valuable weapon wherever *organized* tenants waged rent strikes or struggles for better conditions. Rent control protections and the

Rent Board hearing process gave tenants a greater sense of their own legitimacy and security in fighting back, without which many tenant organizing efforts would not have gotten off the ground. Many of these campaigns had significant results: evictions and rent increases were stopped and landlords were forced to make major repairs and even sign collective bargaining agreements with their tenants.

But the landlords against whom these victories were won were mainly representative of the old breed, who held on to their property for many years and made their profits mainly from rents. By the 1970s, many of these landlords were being replaced by another type for whom rental property ownership was primarily a tax shelter and/or a short-term, speculative investment. For them, income from rents was a minor consideration. They would rather switch—to condos—to fight.

By 1975, these modern landlords and their partners in banking and construction were able to dominate the political struggle over housing in the city and to pull the underpinnings out from rent and eviction controls. In 1975, Mayor Kevin White won his third term after a campaign in which he stressed his support for rent control. But almost immediately after his reelection, with a symphony of anti-rent control propaganda by the real estate industry in the background, White instituted a program of vacancy decontrol which allows rent control to be permanently lifted from apartments after the tenants have moved. This was simply the most politically expedient means of dividing tenants and killing rent control.

By this time the tide of speculation was already on the rise, and the demise of rent control opened the floodgates. Between 1976 and 1982, about 80% of the covered apartments were de-controlled. In areas undergoing gentrification, such as Jamaica Plain, rent increases of 300% to 500% over a few years time became common.

The Boston tenants movement, in the form of a city-wide coalition of neighborhood-based groups, fought the adoption of vacancy decontrol in 1975, and organized, in subsequent years, to resist the complete elimination of remaining rent control regulations. The tactics used have mainly been lobbying city councillors, petitions, press conferences, and testimony at public hearings. But the movement's impact was not great enough to prevent the re-election of overwhelmingly anti-rent control city councils in 1979 and 1981.

Rent control is not the only goal for which Boston residents have organized in their struggle against displacement. Tenant unions have been formed to fight bad conditions, condo conversions, and rent increases, with tactics ranging from legal suits and harassment of landlords through rent strikes, both legal and extra-legal. Neighborhood groups and city-wide coalitions have mounted campaigns and suits against the use of public resources (city funds, land, buildings, and federal grants) to promote luxury and commercial redevelopment. Community groups and individuals have attempted to save abandoned houses and apartment buildings through sweat-equity rehabilitation (using the residents' own labor). Community development corporations have sought state and federal funds for non-profit housing rehabilitation and development.

Residents of subsidized apartment developments have fought to prevent the federal government from completely abandoning HUD-owned and HUD-regulated multi-family projects. Public housing tenants have organized to resist the scandalous neglect of housing projects by the city. They have resisted the city's attempt to hand over to private developers projects on land now considered too valuable for poor people. Coalitions of working class renters and homeowners and progressive professionals have opposed the expansion of universities and medical institutions into surrounding neighborhoods, and have attempted to reverse disinvestment trends through anti-redlining legislation and the channeling of home mortgage interest subsidies into targeted neighborhoods.

## The Results

Where do working class tenants and homeowners stand after the past ten years of struggle in Boston? For starters, a number of the worst slumlords have had their wings clipped or even been put out of business with the aid of rent strikes. Tenant unions in the neighborhoods of Jamaica Plain, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan—many of them organized with the help of City Life—have scored some impressive successes in stopping rent increases and evictions and preventing abandonment. To do so they have had to overcome barriers of language and race, landlord violence, and the bias of the courts in favor of property rights.

The combativeness and perseverance of these organized tenants point to the potential for a larger and more militant grassroots movement, especially among low-income tenants. Some veterans of these tenant unions have become dedicated and battle-wise activists, joining City Life committees as organizers, for example, and making links between tenant unions in different neighborhoods. But for the most part, tenant efforts have remained isolated from each other and focused on individual landlords.

Meanwhile, the community movements against institutional expansion have managed to hang on to a few footholds for working class housing in neighborhoods like Chinatown and Mission Hill; nevertheless, more units have been lost than have been saved or replaced. Public housing tenants have extracted some concessions but have not been able to reverse the overall trend toward further deterioration. Rent and eviction controls helped temporarily to slow the pace of displacement in some neighborhoods, but the majority of apartments have now been de-controlled and no significant restrictions on condo conversion have been won.

In neighborhoods where disinvestment is the dominant pattern, including most communities with a black or latino majority, conditions have grown steadily worse. A few dozen arsonists, most of them convicted as a result of detective work done by community activists, have served time in prison, but the arson wave continues unabated in low-income areas. The response of City Hall has been, "Knock 'em down before they burn down." City Life and neighborhood organizations have fought this policy—reminiscent of Vietnam, of destroying Boston in order to save it. We have succeeded in holding off the bulldozers in some neighborhoods, but the forces that generate abandonment



and make arson almost inevitable are still at play.

So, while the struggles to save existing working class housing have been impressive, we have still lost more than we have saved. Has more been accomplished by those who have focused on trying to increase the supply of affordable housing through anti-redlining campaigns, home mortgage subsidy programs, support for squatters, and sweat-equity rehabilitation programs? Measured in terms of benefits to low-income tenants and neighborhoods, the results have been as meagre as the gains made through the defensive struggles (though lack of space forbids documentation).

In a few cases, non-profit community development corporations (CDCs) have succeeded in building or rehabbing quality housing projects with low and moderate rents. The largest and best-known is Villa Victoria, a 500-unit development in Boston's South End. But most CDCs have failed to save or create any significant amount of affordable housing.

A number of churches and non-profit community groups developed low and moderate rent apartment complexes in the late '60s and early '70s under HUD 236 and 221d3 programs. Most of these projects were caught in the squeeze between rising costs and inadequate subsidies; many non-profit as well as for-profit owners defaulted on mortgage payments, with ownership of the projects reverting to HUD. In recent years, HUD has been rushing to get these projects back on the private market, offering them to investors on a silver, tax-sheltered platter. New owners of projects in "upscale" neighborhoods are being given the green light to raise rents and evict those who can't pay the increased. In projects where rents have been kept low by Section 8 rent subsidies from the pre-Reagan era, HUD allows landlords to minimize maintenance in order to keep profits up.

More recent attempts at non-profit housing development have been defeated by the pro-market, pro-gentrification orientation of the city, state, and federal government. Most would-be development groups have found that current HUD subsidy guidelines would at best enable them to produce a token number of low-cost units in predominantly market-rate or "moderate income" projects, with "moderate" defined in the \$30,000-\$40,000 income range.

What of the efforts to increase the housing supply in inner-city areas by channeling private investment in the form of home mortgage loans into targeted neighborhoods? In a few cases families who would not otherwise have been able to afford a house have received loans, but the *net effect* of these programs seems to have been an increase in the pace of housing price increases and a stimulus to gentrification.

Other groups have been sweat-equity rehabilitation as the key to getting inner-city housing into the hands of low and moderate income residents. But here again, those able to take advantage of this approach have been those who have started out with considerable resources. Most sweat-equity efforts *by people truly in need of housing*, whether in legal or extra-legal (squatting) situations have ended in failure; residents' incomes are simply too low to cover the costs of needed maintenance and repairs.

Although the material gains have been small, tenant union organizing, rent strikes, and rent control and

anti-condo agitation have helped to make housing one of the most hotly-contested issues in the city. As conversations in beauty parlors or barrooms quickly reveal, working class Bostonians remain upset and angry about the high cost and shortage of housing and particularly about the deterioration of neighborhoods.

Protests over rent increases, condo conversions, school closings, lack of garbage collection, threats to HUD-subsidized developments and to public housing projects, arson, and city auctions of property to profiteers continue to flare up like brushfires all over the city, and especially in Black and racially-mixed working class neighborhoods. In addition to this activism, there also exists substantial support for rent control, as a non-binding referendum recently demonstrated.

### Weakness of Tenants' Movement

In spite of this apparent potential for growth, the tenants' movement in Boston today is weak and organizationally fragmented.

The failure of the tenants' movement in Boston cannot be measured solely or even primarily by its inability to stop displacement and the gentrification of the central city. After all, cities in nearly all the advanced capitalist countries are being reshaped in similar ways, and the movements against displacement in Paris and London have not had much more success than we have. There are also factors particular to Boston that may make it especially hard to build a strong city-wide movement here: the virtual ownership of city hall by real estate interests, the absence of strong labor and Black organizations, and the depth of racism in the city.

But of all the barriers that stand in the way of success for the tenants' movement in Boston (and not just in Boston alone), the greatest is the changing economics of urban real estate and the growing gap between the profit levels required by housing investors and the ability of tenants to pay rents necessary to provide those profits. It is the failure of the tenants' movement to come to grips with this reality that is at the root of its weakness.

Many housing activists are aware, of course, that it is harder to win material gains under today's conditions. But for the most part, their response to this realization has been one of strategic retreat, a decision—perhaps not always a conscious decision—to narrow the focus of their efforts and limit their goals to moderate, short-range proposals in the hope of at least cutting the movement's losses.

### Toward a New Direction

For these reasons, we in City Life believe that only a bolder, more radical approach can carry us forward. The economic changes that have brought about a total sellers' market in housing and accelerated the destruction of housing and neighborhoods have drastically reduced the room for gains that might be achieved through regulation of the private market. The basis for "tenant power" as it existed in the late 60s and early 70s has been eroded. But these same changes have created the conditions—and the necessity—for a movement to save working class communities and housing by substituting public for private investment and collective for capitalist control.

To develop this alternative, much new ground must be broken on both a theoretical and practical level. By analyzing the arguments and tactics used by reformist tenant organizations in recent years, we can get a clearer picture of the implications of this approach and the assumptions on which it is based, and we can sketch the outlines of a more promising alternative.

*(1) In arguing for rent and condominium controls, reformist tenant leaders have failed to challenge the assumption that solutions to the housing crisis can and must be found within the boundaries of the housing for profit system. It is precisely this premise that needs to be refuted.*

During every round of the rent control battle in Boston and elsewhere in Massachusetts over the past 12 years, the PR men for the Rental Housing Association have told the same sad tale. "If rent and condo controls are adopted," they say, "We can't survive. Investment in Boston's housing will decline. Buildings will have to be abandoned."

In other words: "If you try to restrict our profits to the 8-10% level, we'll take our money and put it into something that will yield us 15-20%, like condominiums on Cape Code, tax-exempt bonds, or a silicon chip factory in Singapore," which is the kind of thing any rational capitalist would do.

When the liberal tenant organizations have gotten their turn in the ring, far too often their response has been to apologize for rent control.

"You've got it wrong," they say. "Rent control won't cause disinvestment, or at least the kind of rent control we're proposing won't. You can't *prove* rent control is the cause of abandonment. Anyway, we don't want to eliminate the 'fair' profits, only the 'exorbitant' ones. We've got nothing against the good, responsible landlords. It's those greedy, law-breaking types we want to get rid of."

In doing so, the tenants have conceded the most important points in the landlords' argument. They have accepted the notion that those who own the shelter of others have a right to profit from it. They have agreed that those profits must be protected, to some degree at least, so that landlords and bankers will continue to invest in housing. They have reinforced the assumption that holds up these arguments: that private investment is the only way housing can be developed, owned and maintained.

Once these premises have been established, the rest of the real estate industry's position flows logically from them. The landlords come across sounding hard-boiled but realistic, while the tenants' movement is left with little more than a moral plea against throwing old folks and children out on the street.

The irony is that the real estate industry argument could be demolished more easily if the tenants' movement were not afraid to challenge it head-on by refuting the claim that increased private investment is good for everyone. We need only look around us to see the

#### CITY LIFE HOUSING PLATFORM FOR BOSTON

Affordable housing in Boston is disappearing fast. Long-term residents are being displaced. Working class and minority communities are being uprooted. Badly-needed housing is being abandoned, torn down, or burned down. To address this immediate crisis, City Life calls for the following:

##### TO STOP DISPLACEMENT CAUSED BY RENT INCREASES AND CONDOMINIUM CONVERSIONS:

- 1) A stiff tax on profits made by speculation. This will discourage real estate "investors" from buying buildings cheap and reselling them at high prices with little or no improvements.
- 2) A ban on condominiums. Resident-owned housing cooperatives should be allowed, but must be regulated to prevent individual apartments from being re-sold at speculative prices.
- 3) Permanent, strong rent control, including:
  - coverage of all rental units.
  - a Rent Control Board composed of elected representatives of tenants, homeowners, and absentee landlords according to the proportion of the Boston population that each group makes up. Since two-thirds of city residents are tenants, two-thirds of the Board members would be tenants.
  - adequate funding and powers to guarantee enforcement of rent control rules.

##### TO PROTECT TENANTS ORGANIZING FOR BETTER CONDITIONS:

- 4) Recognition of the rights of tenants to form unions, to go on rent strike when landlords violate the law, and to win collective bargaining agreements with property owners.
- 5) Strict enforcement of the state Sanitary (housing) Code, especially in absentee-owned buildings.
- 6) Eviction controls to prevent landlords from evicting tenants in order to get higher rents or to stop tenants from defending their rights.

##### TO PROTECT WORKING CLASS HOMEOWNERS:

- 7) Grants and low-interest loans for weatherization and repairs to low and moderate-income homeowners.
- 8) An alternative to foreclosure for homeowners who can't make their mortgage payments. Instead of losing their homes, they should have the option of turning over title to their house to the Community Housing and Land Trust (see point 15). They would lose the right to sell their house, but could remain living in it for as long as they chose.

##### TO SAVE PUBLIC AND GOVERNMENT-SUBSIDIZED HOUSING:

- 9) Upgrading of all public housing projects. No demolitions and no transfers of public housing projects to private developers or institutions.
- 10) No more sales of HUD-owned projects to profit-making landlords. Immediate foreclosure of government-subsidized projects whose owners fail to repay loans or to provide good maintenance and security at affordable rents.

##### TO END HOUSING DISCRIMINATION:

- 11) Adoption and enforcement of strong laws against discrimination by landlords and housing authorities on the basis of race, sex, sexual preference, number of children, or physical disability.

#### (CITY LIFE HOUSING PLATFORM continued)

##### TO SAVE HOUSING FROM ARSON, ABANDONMENT, AND DESTRUCTION BY SLUMLANDLORDS:

- 12) No payment of fire insurance to absentee landlords except for the purpose of repairing fire-damaged buildings for the tenants who were there before the fire or for providing damages and comparable housing at the same or lower rents to tenants forced to move by fire.
- 13) No more auctions or sales of city-owned property to profit-making landlords or developers. Instead, this property should be transferred to the Community Housing and Land Trust (see point 15).
- 14) Takeover of the property of absentee landlords who repeatedly violate the law in any of the following ways:
  - committing arson
  - failing to make repairs
  - failing to provide heat and other services
  - failing to pay property taxes
  - failing to abide by rent control and eviction regulations

These buildings should then be transferred to the Community Housing and Land Trust.

##### TO REDEVELOP RUN-DOWN HOUSING AND VACANT BUILDINGS AND LAND TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS:

- 15) Establishment of a Community Housing and Land Trust for Boston with local Neighborhood Boards elected by the residents of each community. The CHLT Boards would have the power and the funds to:
  - transfer vacant houses to low and moderate-income owner occupants, along with full back tax abatements, low-interest loans, and technical re-hab assistance. In exchange, the new owners must agree to remain living in their houses, or if they move, to re-sell the house to the CHLT for a price that allows them to recover their cost but not make a profit.
  - transfer vacant or foreclosed buildings and land to tenant cooperatives or non-profit community development corporations, with safeguards to prevent any future re-sale for profit.
  - re-hab and operate buildings as community and tenant-controlled quality public housing.
- 16) Funds for protecting, repairing, and building affordable housing should be obtained by the following means:
  - replacement of taxes on residential property with a steeply graduated state income tax. Pending this, a tax should be collected on incomes over \$35,000 made in the city of Boston.
  - collection of the \$140 million in back property taxes owed to the city, with priority on collection from commercial property owners and absentee landlords.
  - elimination of property tax breaks now given by the city to profit-making corporations, universities, and hospitals.
  - federal funds to the city of Boston, which are now being used to promote development of luxury hotels, shopping areas, and other profit-making projects, should instead be spent to improve housing and neighborhoods for working class residents.

(continued on page 50)

### HOUSING MOVEMENT

(continued from page 13)

result of rising investment and increased property values: most of us can no longer afford to live in the areas where this has occurred. And in the few cases where private investment, leveraged by public funds, has resulted in low and moderate-rent housing, this has been possible only because working class taxpayers have subsidized real estate profits from these projects. Private investment is the heart of the problem, not the key to the solution.

The fact is, any form of rent control strong enough to keep the average rent in Boston down to a level affordable by the average Boston renter—never mind the really poor—would have to cause a significant reduction in rental housing profits. Certainly this would lead many if not most landlords who own housing for investment purposes to look elsewhere for a better return. In short, any version of rent control strong enough to be worth fighting for *will* cause some amount of disinvestment.

What would happen if the tenants' movement, instead of denying this reality, proclaimed it, and presented it as an opportunity to take first steps toward getting housing out of the hands of private capitalists? What if our attitude were, "The landlords say rent control will put them out of business? Well, if they can't provide decent housing at rents we can afford, why should we allow them to remain in business? Let's start working on a better way to run housing."

(2) *The programmatic proposals of the tenants' movement have been primarily defensive ones. Instead, campaigns for defensive measures like rent control must be accompanied by positive proposals for saving and increasing the supply of affordable housing—i.e., how housing can be developed and maintained by something other than investment for profit.*

Many city folks already understand, on a gut level at least, that effective rent control is incompatible with continued profitability of real estate, but no one has yet presented them with any alternative to the devil's choice between higher rents and increased abandonment. The tenant movement's inability to do this has made it hard for us to make a convincing argument that rent control can benefit *all* working class residents of this city.

A working class homeowner, or even a tenant who is not facing imminent loss of her own apartment, can easily see that the only neighborhoods where streets are being repaired, schools kept open, and housing maintained are those where landlords and banks are investing and housing costs are going up. That same individual may realize that the price of this investment is the displacement of one class of residents by another. She may feel terrible about the fact that her less fortunate friends and neighbors are being forced to move away. Yet it is perfectly rational for her to expect that the adoption of rent control will increase the likelihood that the apartment building across the street may be abandoned.

Until we can show her another choice between deterioration and gentrification we will not be able to persuade her to become an active supporter of rent con-

trol. As important as rent control is, it makes sense only as part of a broader program that addresses the issues of neighborhood decay and the housing shortage.

The general outline of a national plan for gradual socialization of existing housing and development of new housing on a non-profit basis has been laid out by Chester Hartman and Michael Stone in \_\_\_\_\_. In *City Life* we are working on how to apply a similar approach to Boston.

City Life's Housing Platform for Boston focuses on housing issues around which there is already a great deal of organizing, struggle, and public update. It proposes steps which, in the case of each issue, would take the housing involved *in the direction* of decommodification (see program appended). In itself it would not achieve full socialization, which of course is impossible in the context of a capitalist-controlled government, financial system, and labor market. But all the measures contained in it would be steps toward decreased control and ownership by private landlords and financial institutions, and increased collective, non-profit ownership and/or control by tenants, community residents, and the public.

For example, along with strong rent and eviction controls, the Platform calls for the rights of tenants to form unions and sign collective bargaining agreements with landlords, and for determination by local residents of development plans for city-owned and tax-foreclosed buildings and land. The reason these proposals are included is not that tenant and community control are solutions in themselves. These demands are there because they provide specific, short-range goals that working class people can fight for while building our power to win more far-reaching measures. Organizing by tenant unions to prevent condo conversions and by community groups to block luxury development projects can help—and have helped—to hold the line against speculation in strategic neighborhoods while providing a focal point from which to expand our organizing.

Our Platform calls for increased resources for existing public housing, for foreclosure and permanent public ownership of HUD-subsidized developments, and for support for non-profit, community-based housing development and low-equity cooperatives. We talk about the measures not as a way of filling the gaps left by the private market but as steps toward the socialization of all housing. We describe our goal as a tenant-controlled, publicly-owned and financed housing, but we see other forms of collective, non-profit ownership (except where co-op conversions drive out low-income tenants) as steps in the right direction.

A more radical measure in the Platform aimed at the same goal is the proposal for a city-financed, democratically-controlled agency (The Community Housing and Land Trust) with the power to take over a certain number of absentee-owned apartment buildings per year, primarily buildings in substandard condition or in tax arrears. With funds from taxes on speculation profits and other sources, the buildings would be rehabilitated and operated as public housing or low-equity co-ops. This proposal is an essential component of any plan for strong rent control, which is bound to be met with threatened or actual disinvestment by landlords.

By offering an alternative to abandonment, such a plan would also increase the incentive for tenants to form unions and struggle for control of their buildings. (Under current conditions, successful organizing sometimes results in landlord abandonment and leaves tenants worse off than before.) This proposal, along with an accompanying demand to stop all transfers of public, HUD, and city-owned housing and land to the private market, begins to present the concept of socialization in a concrete form.

The Platform contains no measure to increase individual home ownership. By proposing the extension of rent control to owner-occupied two and three-family houses, it aims to make investment in home ownership ("let your tenants pay your rent") less profitable. At the same time it recognizes that many working class homeowners are hard-pressed, and calls for grants and loans for weatherization and repairs by low and moderate-income home owners.

Also included is a proposal to give home owners who are unable to afford mortgage and maintenance costs and are therefore facing the loss of their homes the option of turning over title to their houses to a public agency. They would forfeit the right to sell their house for profit but would retain the right to remain living there. The intention here is to separate the negative aspects of home ownership (the burden of debt and the temptation to exploit one's tenants) from the socially positive aspects (security of tenure and the incentive to improve one's home). Rather than saying "everyone should have a chance to own a house"—an impossible goal—we say, everyone, whether they live in a house or apartment, must have the right to secure tenure and decent conditions.

The Platform does not contain any proposals that would aid bankers and housing investors, such as home mortgage subsidies, loans to profit-making developers for low-income housing construction, or Section 8-type rent subsidies. These kinds of programs underwrite the power and profits of the real estate industry in the guise of aiding low and moderate income people. They create increased public debts that must be paid for by current and future generations of workers.

## Radical vs. Reform

The essential difference between City Life's and a social democratic approach is not whether or not we fight for reform—all the proposals in our Platform are of course reforms. Rather, the differences lie: (1) in the kinds of reforms we support (only those which promote public or non-profit ownership and control and none which subsidize private capital; (2) in whether the reforms are presented at ends in themselves or as steps toward socialism and working class power; and (3) in the way in which we believe those reforms can be won (in response to pressure from below and not through top down legislative or administrative measures). Those who stand to gain by our program must be prepared to resist landlord counterattacks—threats of large scale housing abandonment, foreclosures, bank refusals to back municipal bonds, and redbaiting and predictions of doom by the mass media. Unless they are prepared for this and ready to respond with increased struggle, the reforms will not remain on the books for long, or will simply remain unenforced. In

fact, this is a moot point since our program will not be adopted *except* in response to a mass movement committed to direct action not just voting—actions which erode the power of real estate interests at the grass roots level and disrupt the pro-capitalist consensus.

## The MTO

Unfortunately, the lessons of this experience seem to have been forgotten by the leaders of the rent and condominium control movements in Massachusetts and Boston today. This is particularly true of the Massachusetts Tenants Organization (MTO), a group launched three years ago by members of the Democratic Socialist of America. MTO is trying to unite a loose coalition of tenants unions and neighborhood groups behind its campaign for legislative housing reforms, but its goals and methods are precisely those which failed so badly over the past decade.

It may make sense—as one element of a broader strategy—for a strong housing movement to endorse or sponsor candidates and legislation as MTO proposes. But it will not be possible to *build* a strong housing movement by focusing primarily on the electoral process and short-term gains while steering close to the ideological mainstream. On the contrary, this approach creates and reinforces illusions about what can be won at the ballot box. It is based on the idea that power in this society flows from political office, when in reality, the questions of who holds office and what policies they set are *reflections* of power relations in the society as a whole. We will not be able to get a better performance out of elected officials even if we get "our own" into office, until we are able to challenge this power at the top with the countervailing power of a movement that exerts pressure for change from below.

Workers in the 1880s and '90s did not win the right to strike by lobbying their congressmen. The labor movement of the 1930s and '40s won legal backing only *after* taking direct, extra-legal action that threatened the bosses' power at its source, the site of production. If the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s had confined itself to tactics like those of MTO, Jim Crow would still reign in the South. Just as in the past, we will be able to change the laws that oppress us only by building a movement that makes the enforcement of unjust laws impossible.

Similarly, the early 1970s, when the tenants' movement fought to save rent control in Massachusetts, was a time of rent strikes, eviction blockings, and militant, disruptive demonstrations. It was the effect of this kind of direct action and the fear that the situation might get out of hand, more than the reasoned testimony of experts or the pleas of suffering constituents, that influenced state and city lawmakers to extend rent control. This was most dramatically evident in the battle to win rent control in Cambridge in 1969.

The proposals in City Life's Platform for Boston are only the first steps toward socialization. It is the growth of the movement that will make it possible first to imagine and later to win more far-reaching changes. Meanwhile it is important to present very concrete, although limited, goals and demands because they give a way to struggle for their own interests *now*, and in the process to develop the consciousness and power that will make socialization possible.



### **The Cross-Class Alliance:**

*A corollary of the strictly legal, reformist approach is the concept of "tenant power" based on a cross-class alliance of renters as an interest group. What is needed instead is a movement which has as its priority the needs of working class tenants and homeowners.*

The cross-class alliance strategy is based on the assumption that in the area of housing, middle-income and high-income renters have the same basic interests as low-income renters. More than that, the middle class tenants are seen as the motive force, the engine that drives the coalition, because they can provide more votes, funds, connections, and skills.

The assumption that renters of all classes have similar interests is valid only to a very limited extent. High-income and moderate-income tenants stand to gain from moderate rent, eviction, and condo restrictions that give them more bargaining power with landlords and keep rents low enough to allow them more to spend on their "lifestyle," or to save for a downpayment on a house or condo. These tenants want to avoid extreme or sudden rent increases; nevertheless, they can afford to pay rents high enough to keep supplying their landlords with profits. It is these people who have been the main beneficiaries of the kind of moderate to weak rent controls that were won in Boston in 1972 and more recently in a number of California and New Jersey cities.

It would be naive to expect middle class renters to go out on a limb and risk their own immediate gains for the interests of the greater majority of tenants, who can benefit significantly only from much stronger versions of rent control and other anti-capitalist reforms that must accompany strong rent control. This is especially true when those middle class tenants have been appealed to by the movement in terms of their individual, immediate economic interests alone. Furthermore, the very skills and resources that make middle class tenants so valuable to campaigns for moderate rent control also put them in a strong position to limit and control the campaigns.

In City Life we are attempting to base our program and organizing strategy on the needs of people whose housing problems cannot be solved by rent control alone. This is not only because they are the majority, but also because their interests lie in collective, non-capitalist solutions.

### **A Multi-Racial Housing Movement**

*In order to establish the basis for a multi-racial, working class housing movement, connections must be made in both theory and in practice between the situation of public and private housing tenants, and between "renters rights" and other housing issues, such as arson and abandonment.*

The organizations and coalitions which have led the struggles for rent control since 1975 have been predominantly white, and have seldom succeeded in getting groups from the Black, Latino, and Chinese communities actively involved. The reason for this is not that people of color have nothing to gain from rent control and condo restrictions. But it is other issues—deterioration of public housing, the threat to HUD-sponsored low-income developments, arson, and abandon-

ment—that have been seen by people of color as posing the greatest immediate threat to their homes and communities, which have provoked them into taking action.

For the most part, the predominantly white tenant groups have not given direct support to these struggles. They have not accompanied their calls for rent control with proposals that speak to the problems of disinvestment and they have tried to steer clear of supposedly "divisive" issues such as public housing. This is not only because of racism and the fact that tenants in many neighborhoods are out of touch with the housing problems that affect minority communities. It is also because these problems require more radical solutions than most tenant organizations have been willing to endorse or even to conceive of. This is a loss to the white tenant groups, because there is a great deal they could gain by allying more closely with people of color, whose hard experience has led them to see more clearly the need for militancy and for more fundamental change.

### **Is Socialization a "Turn-off"?**

There are many academic experts who agree with City Life that socialization of housing is necessary, but who will not say so except to other members of the elite inner circle of experts and organizers. Ordinary folks they assume, are incapable of understanding a socialist program and wouldn't support it if they did understand it.

Our experience suggests something quite different. Whenever we have presented our ideas about socialization and the steps to get there from here, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. When the alternative is continued devastation and insecurity, socialization does not appear to be a utopian fantasy or a threat to the American way of life. Most city folks do not need to be convinced that radical changes are needed—only that they are winnable and workable. People whose own housing prospects under the current system are bleak are most enthusiastic about the idea of socialized housing; tenants who have been "condo-ed out" more than once, homeowners who are unemployed and fear foreclosure; organized tenants who discover their landlord would rather walk away than put money into repairs. As housing options narrow, more people will find themselves in a position where a plan for increased public investment and socialization offers the only alternative to worse housing than they had before or to homelessness.

For these people, the kinds of questions and doubts about our proposals that people express are usually very pragmatic: How would this plan apply to the lot across the street? How can we wring these concessions out of the landlords and the government? How will tenant and community control of publicly-owned housing work? Where do we begin?

— If we make it our conscious goal, we can help people engaged in organizing around rent control, in tenant unions, against arson and abandonment, etc., to understand their own situation in terms of the over-all housing crisis and the broader crisis of capitalism. We can also show them that something better is possible, and that their own efforts are helping to make it more possible. This knowledge in itself helps make people

feel stronger and better able to keep fighting when victories seem distant or small. This is one way that having a socialist program helps to strengthen the movement. It also provides a framework for alliances among people struggling around different kinds of housing issues, and a set of guidelines to help people formulate their specific goals and demands.

It is only through the process of direct organizing that we will be able to build the power to win our larger goal. Every instance of people fighting to save a building or parcel of land can help us to build this power, especially when we win. But even when we lose, our power can grow, if in the process of struggle, people get better organized, gain skills and confidence and a better understanding of the system and the need to change it. It is our job as socialists to see that the organization gets built, the skills developed, and the con-

nections made.

Building the housing movement from the bottom up is not an end in itself. Socialization of housing—like socialism in general—can only go so far without a transformation of social relationships. The elimination of control by those who own housing for profit is only the precondition for this transformation. For socialization to work well, residents of buildings and blocks need to develop a sense of mutual support and responsibility and learn to work collectively. It is through the process of common struggle that this sense of community is developed or rediscovered. It is a gradual and uneven process, but it really does occur. All of us in City Life would surely have lost heart if we did not see ourselves and the people in the buildings and neighborhoods where we organize going through changes of this kind as we work and struggle together ■

HOLMSTROM (continued from page 34)

right to control her reproduction seems to me probably of this order—but women's right to collectively control their reproduction seems *clearly* of this order.

Not all "members" of society carry and bear children; only women do. Reiman is insufficiently sensitive to the burden and pain of a woman who is forced to have a child she does not want or to have an abortion when she wants a child. How exactly does Reiman think that society could *require* women to have children or not to have children? Women have proven throughout history how desperately they desire to decide this question for themselves. What could justify the kind of coercion and repression that would be necessary to enforce society's "requirement"? If women's real interests as to whether or not to have children were not in conflict with those of the rest of society, then most women's desires or at least actions would probably be in accord as well—or could be brought into accord by social pressure, moral suasion and material incentives. The cases where these would not work would be too insignificant to do much damage.

More problematic is if there is a genuine conflict of individual and group interests. For example, the Chi-

nese government has been trying to keep down population but without great success and at times has resorted to forced abortions. Would Reiman approve of this? The fact is that it is in the peasants' interests to have more children because children can help them more than the government can (given the still backward state of the economy). Since Chinese government policy is not democratically determined we do not know for sure how the majority of the population would assess their interests. If, however—hypothetically—there were a democratic socialist society with a significant minority whose interests regarding children were different from those of the majority and who could not be persuaded by non-coercive means, it seems to me that it would still be worse, on the whole, to coerce the women of the minority to have children or have abortions than it would be for society to have too many or too few. Ultimately, I think each woman ought to be allowed to decide. At minimum, however, only the women of the society should make the decision. Only they could appreciate both the profound importance to each individual woman of controlling her reproduction as well as the needs of the rest of society ■

LEIGH (continued from page 49)

to control its own national economy. Even in Poland where the state owns the economy, the international banks more and more dictate economic policy. Reagan's policies of reducing the costs of capital (government regulation, welfare etc.) are not aberrations. They are likely to be the wave of the future as the economic crisis gets more severe and each nation competes to create the most favorable climate for capital investment (low wages, low taxes, etc.). Contrary to the authors' analysis, we are likely to see a return to the old pattern of welfare benefits only granted under pressure.

The choice we have before us is not the gentle reform that Piven and Cloward suggest. Instead it is either to suffer continual declines in living standards and welfare (not to speak of wars and the threat of nuclear annihilation) punctuated by temporary victories—or to replace the whole competitive world market economy with a new system based on rational democratic planning for human needs. Under capitalism, the rich will continue to run the state and use it against us. If we wish to change that situation we'll have to take power ourselves and abolish capitalism and the various states that serve it ■